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W. H. AUDEN'S POETIC SENSE OF HISTORY

The essay focuses on the part of W. H. Auden's poetry that demonstrates his lifelong interest in history. The analysis starts with the poems composed during the 1930s that reveal Auden's historical affinity and strengthen his reputation as a modernist poet. The attention is then drawn to the poems included in the collection entitled *Homage to Clio* (1960) which show Auden's deep insight into the crucial aspects of historiography that in modernist epoch took quite an unexpected turn. Auden's denial of historicism, seen as a part of Nietzschean heritage, is correlated with T. S. Eliot's and Ezra Pound's meditations on the problems of history and tradition. The poems we analyzed refer to the problem of the malleability of historical truth, traditional, objectivist vs. idealistic and uncritical historiography and the gradual degradation of the classic idea of history embodied by Clio. In spite of the fact that Auden did not offer any new concept of history the touch of his poetic genius, magnificently displayed in his musings on history, makes them the true monuments of his epoch.

Keywords: history, historicity, modernism, truth, muse, tradition, historiography

History in general and the whole range of its aspects used to be one of the most favourite topics of Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973), late modernist and one of the most influential British poets of the 20th century. It permeates almost the whole body of his poetic work. Auden's meditations on history range from those rather short sayings such as "History opposes its grief to our buoyant song / to our hope its warning" (Auden 2007: 169) to those that expound on the mythic history of man from the creation to the present. The first quoted fragment in which history is seen as a restrictive force to poets and the second one tending to provide us with the overall view into the spiritual development of mankind are both included in the famous Auden's and Isherwood's (Christopher Isherwood 1904-1986) poetry collection *Journey to a War* (1938). The authors' motive to compose this rather eclectic collection came, among other things, as a result of their firm decision not to stay out of the tumultuous historical events of the decade that Auden used to call "low and dishonest" (Auden 1979: 86). They went to China in 1938 and witnessed the hostilities that broke out between the Japanese, who at that time invaded Manchuria, and the Chinese forces.

Auden was known to have visited Spain, a year before his Chinese adventure, in the days when the Civil War was in full swing. As a notorious

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leftist and an enthusiastic supporter of the Republicans, Auden was determined to take an active part in fighting. However, the atrocities committed by both warring sides and the betrayal of left-wing values, shocked him deeply. After a couple of months he returned to Britain but with a firm decision to offer a poetic response to the horrors he witnessed. *Spain 1937*, the collection of poems published in the same year, contains some of Auden's most memorable views on history such as the one when poor, famine-stricken Spanish pleads: "History the operator the / Organizer" (52) to show up so that he and his fellow compatriots could understand the misfortune that came upon them. The general tone of the lines leaves us in no doubt about the further responsiveness of the blind forces of history.

Journey to a War and *Spain 1937* are composed at the end of the thirties when the political crisis in Europe seemed to have reached its peak. In a few years' time, the tragic flow of history leading to the outbreak of the Second World War proved quite an inspiration for Auden. He commemorated the event in a long poem entitled "September 1, 1939". The empathy expressed in the poem obscures the fact that, in the moment of Hitler's invasion of Poland, Auden was miles away from the battlefield. Rainer Emig points out that the historic perspective of "September 1, 1939" is a bit different from that offered in "Spain 1937" since it is "not being expressed in political or scientific terms, but in personal and, broadly speaking, Christian ones" (Emig 2000: 110). Besides, Emig draws our attention to the fact that author correlates Luther (the symbolic representative of the aggressive Protestant culture) with Hitler "a psychopathic god misled by a Jungian imago" (Ibid).

Later on Auden refers to "exiled Thucydides" who knew "All that a speech can say / About Democracy, / And what dictators do" (Auden 1979: 87). One cannot miss the highly effective ironic context in which the Greek historian is mentioned. Thucydides is known as an author of the history of the Peloponnesian War, a man who "analyzed all in his book ... / The habit-forming pain, / Mismanagement and grief" (Ibid). The book, in fact, contains Pericles's eulogy delivered in honour of democracy which Thucydides on his part ironizes so as to expose the deficiencies of the political system. Auden's reference to Thucydides therefore implies that the work of a historian is, as a rule, worthless when used as a means of political propaganda.

The poems analyzed so far present history not as a meaningful process but a chaotic, entropic flow, whose basic premises, if there are any at all, are of a rather doubtful validity. Such Auden's views on history comply fully with what early modernists used to say about it. The lines from T. S. Eliot's *Gerontion* became the epitome of modernist concept of history:

History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors,
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities. Think now
She gives when our attraction is distracted,
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
That the giving famishes the craving. (Eliot 1991: 30)

In some of his musings on history Auden, like Eliot (1888-1965), does not hide his skepticism towards so-called *magistra vitae*. "History to the defeated / May say Alas but cannot help or pardon" claims Auden in *Spain 1937* (1979: 55). The pronounced malleability of history, expressed in both Auden's and Eliot's poetry is more or less a common feature of the works of almost all of the modernists. The early British modernists "found progress to be an historical structure unsuited to their needs and perception of reality" and the linear concept of history gave way to the cyclical or mythological one (Williams 2002: 2). Modernist rejection of the positivist concept of history, that prevailed in the Edwardian period, in fact originated from the works of Friedrich Nietzsche who in his famous essay *On the Use and Abuse history for Life* announces that "the excesses of history has seized the plastic force of life ... and it understands no more to make use of the past as a powerful nourishment" (Nietzsche 2010: 58). According to Nietzsche, the evil of historicism may be cured by "the unhistorical ... the art and the power of being able to forget and to enclose oneself with borders" and "the super-historical ... the powers which divert the gaze from what is developing back to what give existence an eternal and unchanging character, to art and religion" (Nietzsche 2010: 59). Influenced by Nietzsche, many British modernists began to perceive both past and present time as chaotic and unfathomable.

However, certain critics think that their anti-historicism does not include the utmost denial of the historical thinking in general. Accordingly, their historical perspective "illuminatessome of the problems of the period as they were felt by informed observers and ... illustrate some of the subtle ways in which history can be used." Besides, modernist notions of history "... were crucial in the development of one of the most important innovations in artistic practice of the twentieth century" (Williams 2010: 3). Paul de Man also tackles the modernists' anti-historical frame of mind in his musings on Nietzsche's *The Use and Abuse of History for Life*. He claims that it "becomes impossible to overcome history ... in the name of modernity because both are linked by a temporal chain that gives them a common destiny" (Newman 2002:152). According to de Man the most controversial feature of modernity is its denigration of the past that would, if perpetuated, lead to continual, entropic repetition which in fact never occurs (153).

Therefore we cannot possibly libel Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and T. S. Eliot as the anti-historic thinkers. A great deal of their work is based but on history and, besides, they produced rather influential pieces of criticism dealing with the problem of historical knowledge. In the seminal essay entitled "Tradition and Individual talent", Eliot elaborates the notion of "historical sense" that makes a writer traditional. According to him this sense is a "sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together" (Eliot 1975: 38). Pound, like Eliot, came out with his own definition of *historical sense*. "We do NOT know the past in chronological sequence," asserts Pound, "It may be convenient to lay it out anesthetized on the table with days pasted on here and there, but what we know we know by ripples and spirals eddying out from us and from our time" (Pound 1970: 60). Both

these highly idiosyncratic views on history imply that past and present are intermingled inseparably and that the act of creation would be impossible without any kind of historical perspective.

The modernist approach to history is easily recognized in Auden's poetry. Auden, unfortunately, did not speculate upon the history of historical knowledge but what we observe in the poems he composed in 1930's is that his attitude towards history was, like his predecessors', dialectical, marked not only by the resistance to historicity but by the incessant return to historical topics and sources as well. At that time Auden was not recognized by the critics as an author particularly interested in history. He came to be known as such in 1950's when he published the whole series of poems dealing with the relationship of history and art, history and present time and problems of historiography. The most outstanding ones are "Makers of History", "The Old Man's Road", "The Epigoni", "The Secondary Epic" and "Homage to Clio." The name of the last of these was taken as the title of a slender collection published in 1960. It includes the poems that we mentioned and several others. Some of the critics, Auden's contemporaries, were not so enthusiastic about the collection. Thom Gunn considered it Auden's worst book and Philip Larkin claimed that "it had not advanced significantly beyond the work of the 1930's (Sharpe 2007: 63). Later critics, however, used to appreciate *Homage to Clio*.

The thing that both Auden's poems of the 1930's and *Homage to Clio* have in common is the author's extraordinary viewpoint, a sort of a trait, that Auden inherited from Thomas Hardy whose work he admired. In his piece of criticism on Hardy's poetic technique Auden points out that what he valued most in Hardy is: "his hawk's vision, his way of looking at life from a very great height" (Wetzsteon 2007: 4). He further explains that taking such a vantage point means: "to see the individual life related not only to the local social life of its time, but to the whole of human history, life on the earth, the stars, gives one both humility and self-confidence" (Ibid).

Such a perspective is something we could easily observe in Auden's *Spain 1937*, *Sonnets from China* and "September 1, 1939". Auden looks both as an author immersed in the woes of every single individual in war torn societies and the one who could bridge the distance between Hitler's psychology, explained by Jungian concept of a "huge imago", and Martin Luther's reversal of Christianity tenets. Auden's historical poems of the 1950s, on the other hand, provide a very profound insight in the problems of history and reliability of historical knowledge. The author retains his "hawk's vision" but is definitely less personal in his judgments.

"Makers of History" (1955) deals with two different approaches to history. Firstly, there are the protagonists of the traditional, objectivist historiography, favoured by Auden, who are interested in the remnants of the past such as "coins and weapons" whereas they wilfully discard "those reiterations of one self – importance / Bywhom they date them" (Auden 2007: 598). Their historical premises based on the thorough insight into artefacts, are juxtaposed with the conclusions reached by the uncritical historians, legend-makers who belong to another school of historiography the who could "... soon compose

a model / As many as any of whom schoolmasters tell / Their yawning pupils' (Ibid) Instead of history that draws up from" might-be-maps of might-have-been campaigns" and "Quotes from four-letter-pep-talks to the troops" (Ibid), Auden offers the one whose task is:

Simply to add Greatness, incognito,
Admired plain-spoken comment on itself
By Honest John,
And simpler still the phobia, the perversion,
Such curious as tease humanistic
Unpolitical palates. (598-599)

Auden's view on history can be related to some of the principles that Georg Lukacs formulated in *The Historical Novel* (1955). In his critical survey of Walter Scott's historical novels Lukacs dismisses the Hegelian concept of *world – historical individual* referring to some great man, king, reformer or military commander who is the chief event initiator in the flow of history. Lukacs claims that the importance of such individuals arises not from their extraordinary personal qualities, but from the way they represent the important social forces of the time. (Kemal 2002: 251) Scott's true heroes are not the princes but people of a modest social position, "Honest John" as mentioned in Auden's poem, those who clearly do not play the leading role in some great historical conflict.

Auden does not spare the ironic remarks on account of an idealistic historian captivated by legends and big words. For Auden he is a: "Composite demi-god, prodigious worker, / ... The burly slave to a ritual and martyr / To numerology. (Auden 2007: 599) In the last stanza the author is quite emphatic in his praise of the historians who are ready to put to test their assumptions thus winning the gratitude of the Muse of history since Clio: "... loves those who bred them better horses, / Found answers to their questions, made their things...." (Ibid).

"History of Truth" written in 1958, confronts truth of the past and of the present time thus laying the stress on the mutability of human vision of truth. In the times bygone "when being was believing / truth was the most of any credibles / more first, more always, than a bat-winged lion ..." (608). The second strophe confirms that as for the people of the past: "Truth was their model as they strove to build / a world of lasting objects to believe in" (Ibid). The *conditio humanae* referred to in the first two strophes resemble, to an extent, the first two stages or epochs in the development of the history of mankind as designated by Gianbattista Vico in his seminal work *The New Science* (1725).

These epochs are the *age of gods* and the *age of heroes*. The first one is characterized by the belief of the people that they live under the divine governments whereas the language they use is a mute language of signs and physical objects having natural relations to the ideas that they wished to express (Vico 1974: 20). The second epoch is the era of heroes who "reigned everywhere in aristocratic commonwealths, on account of a certain

superiority of nature which they held themselves to have over the plebs” (Ibid). The language they use is “heroic language” consisting of “heroic emblems, or similitudes, comparisons, images, metaphors, and natural descriptions” (Ibid). The third epoch, according to Vico, is the *age of men*, in which “all men recognized themselves as equal in human nature, and therefore there were established first the popular commonwealths and then the monarchies” (Ibid). The language that is used is known for “using words agreed upon by the people, a language of which they are absolute lords, and . . . a language whereby the people may fix the meaning of the laws” (Ibid). What Auden introduces as the truth in the third strophe looks like an ironic reversal of Vico’s views on *the age of men* since:

...practical like paper dishes,
 Truth is convertible to kilo-watts,
 Our last to do by is an anti-model,
 Some untruth anyone can give the lie to,
 A nothing no one need believe is there. (Auden 2007: 608)

The very title (“Homage to Clio”, 1955) of the pivotal poem of the collection vaguely suggests that one (poet or historian) is to pay or has already paid respect to the Muse of History. At the beginning of the poem a lyrical subject presents us with a pleasant pastoral scene. He enjoys himself in the realm of Aphrodite (goddess of love) and Artemis (goddess of hunt and wilderness) where even “banalities can be beautiful” (Auden 1979: 233). The only thing that is in discord with singing and shining flora and fauna is the book that he reads which is “dead” (Ibid) and as such it is found unsatisfactory by the reader. Then, all of a sudden, the poet is summoned to appear before the Muse and the encounter is supposed to bring an enlightenment or a relief to the poet whose inspiration dried up. The Muse, however, does not utter any response to poet’s plea. Disappointed the poet replies in the name of all the poets (historians):

After that
 Nothing is easy. We may dream as we wish
 Of phallic pillar or navel stone

 With twelve nymphs twirling about it, but pictures
 Are no help: your silence already is there
 Between us and any magical centre
 Where things are taken in hand. (Ibid)

The poet addresses her again as “Madonna of Silence” and “Muse of the Unique Historical fact” (234) but the deity remains unresponsive as if she hinted that the solution is to be found by poets or historians themselves. Rainer Emig resolves this dubious situation by claiming that: “The Muse of History is a source of inspiration because she is an absence which invites completion” and that “... she is not so much an explanation, an ontology explaining origins or a teleology providing a perspective for the future or justification for prescribed actions, as she is the desire for such explanations” (Emig 2000: 113).

That is why Clio symbolically remains a mysterious figure whom the poets or historians of the present time cannot even recognize. "How shall I describe you" (Auden 1979: 234) wonders the poet not even knowing how to conjure up Muse's eyes:

They
 Can be represented in granite ...
 ... but what icon
 Have the arts for you, who look like any
 Girl one has not noticed and show no special
 Affinity with a beast? I have seen
 Your photo, I think, in the papers, nursing
 A baby or mourning a corpse: (Ibid)

The poet wishes to model her eyes out of granite, which, as a solid material, is perfectly becoming to Goddess's magnificent stature but, as we can see, Clio of our days is "like any other girl" whose photo can be "seen ... in the papers" (Ibid). It is evident that the Muse of History deteriorated, in the course of the centuries, into a silent observer who looks like an ordinary mortal.

In the next line the poet (historian) looks as if he overcame his lack of confidence and begins to grasp his Muse's hidden workings. Now he knows that the important characters in history like "Duke of Cumberland" and the Frankish kings "...The Short, the Bald, the Pious, the Stammerer," are not of her immediate concern (Ibid). Her true "children" are observed as the "Lives that obey [her] and move like music, / Becoming now what they only can be once, / Making of silence decisive sound" (235). Clio's constant neglect of so called key-figures refers to Auden's obvious denial of monumentalism in world's history which, as we said, originated from Nietzsche and influenced Georg Lukacs. Both authors put forward that it deadens the past thus preventing the future from developing. The patronage of Clio is enjoyed only by those poets and historians who could operate within the realm of her over imposing silence.

Enlightened, the poet assumes pious attitude again and pleads the "Muse of Silence": "to forgive [their] noises / And teach [them their] recollections" (Ibid). The last stanza, however, contains an additional address that the poet imparts to the muse but this time piety is mixed with a feeling that he and his fellows (poets and historians) will remain permanently estranged from the Muse:

Approachable as you seem
 Idare not ask you if you bless the poets,
 For you do not look as if you ever read them
 Nor can I see a reason why you should. (Ibid)

We can, naturally, know for certain that the "Muse of unique historical fact" does not read poets nor she will ever try to do so since poets unavoidably violate the truth by diverting from the historical fact to mythmaking. The historians commit the identical adulteration of the historic truth since every single version of historical events they produce makes these more obscure instead of clarifying them.

Susannah Gottlieb draws the attention to the striking similarities between Auden's poem and the beginning of Nietzsche's famous collection of essays *Thoughts out of Season*. Both of them begin with the description of the idyllic world of the animals. Nietzsche points out that the bliss of the animal world springs from the fact that animals' reasoning is not anchored in history (Gottlieb: 2013, 187). When summoned to speak about its happiness the beast remains silent since it "immediately forgets what it wanted to say" (Ibid). The animals from Auden's poem also "escape the pains of memory" since they "chirp like a tearless bird – unthinkably" (Ibid). There is, however, a difference between the two as far as this specific state of mind is concerned. According to Nietzsche, man who remembers and is a historical being envies the animal that "immediately forgets and sees each moment really perish" (188). Auden's lyrical subject, on the other hand, does not envy the beasts that shook off the burden of history and is paradoxically "glad [he] could be unhappy" (Auden 1979: 235). The common characteristic for both authors is that they condemn historicity.

Among the numerous essays W. H. Auden wrote throughout his life, there is not a single one wholly dedicated to the problem of history, historical truth and historical knowledge. His thoughts upon the matter are scattered in his writings as much as in his lectures and interviews and these fragments do not fully reveal the true scope of Auden's interest. The poems we analyzed, however, affirm his competence and high originality in treating the ontological problems of the sort. As we could see, Auden's historical perspective changed through the decades. In the poems composed in the 1930's the author assumes so-called "hawk's eye" standpoint breaking open the amazing historical vistas on Spain, China and Europe set ablaze by the Second World War. The poems written in the 1950's are less personal and prove that Auden was well-acquainted with the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Georg Lukacs, Gianbattista Vico and other famous protagonists of the philosophy of history. His meditations of history are typically modern and as such comply, as far as basic aspects are concerned, with the ones formulated by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. The greatest quality of the collection, achieved by Auden's poetic genius, is that the basic problems of the philosophy of history are clad in a strikingly new aura. Auden's rather relaxed and unique approach, however, must not trick us into overlooking things such as the implicit controversy with Vico in the third strophe of the "History of Truth" or preventing us from realizing that his unorthodox, deconstructive presentation of Clio paves the way to the aesthetics of postmodernism. Sometimes Auden can turn quite unhistorical when like in the poem "This Lunar Beauty" exclaims that the moon, patron of poets, "has no history" (16). These contradictions, unpredictable turns and the author's everlasting readiness to challenge the allegedly affirmed historical creeds and tenets will undoubtedly provoke the new readings of Auden's poems in the decades to come.

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POETSKI OSEĆAJ ISTORIJE V. H. ODNA

Rezime

Ovaj rad predstavlja osvrt na deo opusa istaknutog engleskog modernog pesnika Vistana Hju Odn koji se na zanimljiv način bavi teorijskom mišlju o istoriji. Odn je identifikovan kao stvaralac pomenutih usmerenja već tridesetih godina prošlog stoleća kada je, inspirisan ratnim događanjima u Španiji i Kini, napisao antologijske stihove o takozvanom „teroru istorije” čije je delovanje neposredno osetio. Upravo tim pesmama u kojima se mešaju univerzalna i individualna poetska perspektiva, započinje analiza Odnove istorijske misli. Potom slede pesme koje su pisane pedesetih godina prošlog veka i koje su sakupljene u zbirci *Poklonjenje boginji Klio*, objavljenoj 1960. godine. Ove pesme afirmišu Odn kao tipičnog modernistu, baštinika ničeanskog antiistorizma, kao i Eliotovih i Paundovih koncepcija o prožimanju tradicije i istorije. Odn, osim toga, pokazuje i da mu filozofska razmišljanja o pojmu istorijske istine, suprotstavljenim istoriografskim školama i vekovnoj degradaciji idealnog pojma istorije, od koje odstupaju kako istoriografija tako i umetnost, nimalo nisu strana. Kao pravi stvaralac modernog doba, distanciran od predmeta o kojem spekulise, Odn se ne može uzdržati od ironijskog osvrta na neke klasične koncepcije istorijskog razvoja kao što je ona

osmišljena od strane istaknutog filozofa Đanbatista Vika. Iako sklon implicitnim polemikama ove vrste, Odn nije bio tvorac revolucionarnih hipoteza u ovoj oblasti. Umesto toga, on je čitav kompleks aktuelnih ideja o istoriji odenuo poetskom aumom neospornih vrednosti koje će nas stalno podsticati da im se vraćamo.

Ključne reči: istorija, istoričnost, modernizam, istina, muza, tradicija, historiografija

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